

Weakness Turned Strength

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Category: Halo

Genre: Angst, Hurt-Comfort

Language: English

Characters: Cortana, Master Chief/John-117

Status: Completed

Published: 2012-09-18 00:55:57

Updated: 2012-09-18 00:55:57

Packaged: 2016-04-27 01:24:39

Rating: K+

Chapters: 1

Words: 1,345

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Some scars are harder to see than others.

Spoilers/Speculation from Halo 4.

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Author's Notes: **I have to give kudos and praise to patriot_jackie for her "You never told me how much he hurt you." mini-fic which inspired this fic. This story takes place right after Cortana's apparent freakout ("I will not allow you to leave this planet!"-from the Halo 4 E3 trailer- and "I didn't mean to..." from the A Hero Awakens BTS vid) on the bridge of the ****_Infinity_****. There are a ton of references to "Human Weakness" which, if you haven't read it, tells what happens to Cortana from the end of Halo 2 until her rescue.**

There are _tons_ of spoilers and spec from the trailers and the BTS videos, so you've been warned.

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><p>"I need to-" A look of panic passed over her face for a fraction of a second. "I need to run a self-diagnostic."<p>

Cortana's gaze flickered from Captain Del Rio to John before disappearing.

"Cortana," Del Rio called. "Respond now."

She didn't reappear.

The captain lifted his eyes to John's face. "Do you still want me to tell me that she's operating normally? That she poses no threat?" He pointed at the display where had Cortana had been. "Find her and get her out of my ship's systems. I don't need her rampancy to complicate things any more than they already are."

John bristled. Yes, Cortana's outburst had been out of character -her shaky quasi-apology even more so- but she had done nothing to demonstrate that she would harm the _Infinity or her crew.

"Here." He ejected Cortana's chip and set it in the Chief's palm with more force than necessary. "You have fifteen minutes."

The Spartan spun on his heel and left the bridge, ignoring the stares of the crew that followed him. He walked down the halls of the _Infinity purposefully, as if he knew exactly where Cortana would be.

But he knew the truth; Cortana was only going to be found when she was ready to reveal herself.

He went down a flight of stairs and strode down a long corridor, glancing at the time stamp on his HUD. He had just over ten minutes before the deadline. "Cortana, please respond."

There was silence.

He turned another corner, his sense of concern growing. John didn't want to know what the captain had in mind if he didn't find Cortana within the allotted time. Del Rio hadn't taken kindly to them coming aboard their ship before Cortana's outburst.

"I should have known we would find you on this planet. You two are a lot of trouble, you know that?" he had said, pointing at the Chief's visor.

"Do you say that to all stranded UNSC personnel you find? Or just ones that have saved humanity?" Cortana had retorted from behind the two men, hand on hip.

John gave his head a slight shake, pulling him from the memories. He opened the comm channel again. "Cor-"

A NAV point appeared on his HUD before he could finish speaking her name.

Cortana.

He wasn't far from her location. He walked through another hall, turned at the T-junction and found himself standing in front of the door leading to an observation bay.

He stepped inside.

Cortana was in the corner of the room, her avatar glowing from the holotank. She was sitting cross-legged, facing the large bay window.

"He's right, you know," she said without preamble. "I shouldn't be in the ship's systems."

John shook his head. "You wouldn't do anything to the _Infinity."

"Not yet," she retorted. "But I feel the pull of rampancy, Chief."

Every second I am in here, I am devouring data at a dangerous rate." She turned to him. "It was easier on the _Dawn_. There was only so much I could do, only so much data I could review. But even then, I knew that I was only delaying the inevitable."

They were not going to have this conversation. He just needed more time to convince Del Rio to establish contact with Earth. Doctor Halsey would be able to help. She would be able to save Cortana.

Cortana sighed softly. "I haven't been the same since _High Charity_. Since the Gravemind. You know that."

John crossed the room and stood in front of the projector. Yes, he had known something was different with Cortana the moment he had slid her chip into his armor after he had rescued her. The interface was more intense, the presence of Cortana more pronounced.

"I...overestimated my ability to thwart his advances." Then, softly. "I made a mistake."

"You did what you thought was best." And what he had thought what was best too. If he hadn't been completely convinced, he would have never agreed to leave her behind.

"You don't get it," she said, rising to her feet. Her pupils turned white for a second like they had on the bridge. "_I made a mistake!_I thought I could handle him. I thought I was stronger!"

There was a niggle in the back of his mind, a sense of concern for the AI in front of him. "You were strong enough to hold onto the Index," he countered, hoping to pull her from her abrupt anger.

"Barely." She dropped to her knees. "The Gravemind...he lured me with his knowledge. He taunted me. He..." she trailed off, looking away as if ashamed.

A second passed. And then, another.

"He violated me."

Those three words spoken in a voice that was the most fragile he had ever heard caused a wave of anger to crash over John; the intensity caught him off-guard. He wanted no one to suffer at the hands of the enemy, but this was worse. This was Cortana, this was...personal.

He forced his voice to be calm. "You never told me how much he hurt you."

She gave him a half-shrug. "As I recall, we were a little busy saving the universe. Besides, what good would it have done? The damage that he inflicted on me can't be undone. I'm corrupted." Her voice grew a little stronger as she continued to speak. "He reached in and snatched whatever information he could to use against me. He knew what hurt me. What to use against me."

"Which was?"

She raised her gaze to him and gave him a 'isn't it obvious?' look.
"You."

An uncomfortable feeling settled over John. Cortana had always been the more open one between them, but even she had been mostly quiet on the subject of their relationship, much to John's relief.

She continued talking, unaware or unconcerned with his awkwardness.
"He said that I could stay with you forever. For an AI who was contemplating her own mortality for the first time, it was very tempting to listen to him. But as he kept blathering, I realized something that he couldn't understand: that as much as you are my weakness, you are my strength."

He knelt down, coming to eye-level with her. His hand settled a few inches from her feet.

John knew he would never be able to put into words how he felt about Cortana; he was still trying to learn that for himself. The only thing he knew is that he was going to figure out a way for Cortana to survive. "We're going to get through this."

She looked bemused. "'We're'?"

"I promi-"

Her mirth evaporated immediately. She looked stricken. "Don't. Not this time, John."

He ignored her. "You're going to make it. I promise."

She placed a weightless hand on his index finger. "You sound as if failure isn't an option."

"It's not."

She looked at him with an open longing that caused his earlier awkwardness to return. Then, she pulled her hand back and took a step back. "I hope you're right, Chief."

So did he.

End
file.